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Anti-Racialism or Censorship? The 1802 Jewish Riots at Covent Garden Opera and the Career of Thomas John Dibdin

V . E . C H A N C E L L O R

R IOTOUS audiences at the opera are not new. They quite commonly occurred at Covent Garden and the other licensed theater in Drury Lane in the late eighteenth century. The aristocracy and gentry in the more expensive seats (i.e., the boxes and the pit) were usually well behaved, especially when royalty was present; but the gallery where the servants of the upper classes and the impoverished theatergoers sat was more volatile, drunken, and easily manipulated. Trouble was caused by the employment of French artistes, or those suspected of being so. More often, changes in seating arrangements or prices of admission were to blame. Sometimes there were personal factors, as when an individual artist incurred the wrath of patrons either because of an inadequate performance or on account of a notorious private life.

An anti-racial element was quite unusual, however. One of the most notable examples occurred at a performance of Thomas John Dibdin's comic opera *Family Quarrels*, which was given at the Covent Garden Theatre in December 1802. The song "I courted Miss Levi" aroused furious opposition from Jewish members of the audience in the cheaper seats, and on successive nights the rest of the performance was drowned out. The violent reaction was ascribed in Dibdin's 1827 *Reminiscences* to a determination to defend Jewish women against insult, which in part it was. It is questionable whether Dibdin was motivated by commercial considerations — he made £630 from royalties and sales of sheet music of the notorious song — or by a wish to please the government. During the temporary peace with France (1802–5), government ministers may have looked for an opportunity to rouse popular feelings against minorities such as Jews, gypsies, and Africans to deflect attention away from the hardship, high taxation, and repression that had reigned in Britain during the French revolutionary wars. In the press, demand for freedom from censorship was raised against the protests of groups who were defamed.



Thomas John Dibdin as a young man

Thomas John Dibdin (1771–1841) came from a family “of more genius than prudence,” as recorded in his obituary.¹ He was the illegitimate son of the talented dramatist, musician, and writer of patriotic nautical songs Charles Dibdin (1748–1814). His mother was Harriet Pitt (Mrs. Davenet or Davenant), an actress and dancer from a theatrical family. The menage soon broke up when Charles Dibdin, an ill-tempered man, departed from the company. Mrs. Davenet and her sons Charles Isaac Mungo and Thomas John were left destitute. Thomas’s godfather, the great actor David Garrick, came to the financial rescue. Young Thomas was given the role of Cupid to Mrs. Siddons’s Venus in a revival of *Jubilee*, a 1775 entertainment in tribute to William Shakespeare.² However, after Garrick’s death in 1779 Thomas Dibdin’s prospects together with those of his mother and elder brother Charles became uncertain. Thomas rejected a musical education at Saint Paul’s Cathedral after a year. A happy period at a preparatory school at Wandsworth, near London, was followed by the harsh regime of a northern school in the county of Durham, where he received a classical education, kept a toy theater, and began to attend plays. Perhaps in desperation over his defiant conduct, his uncle Cecil Pitt of Dalston bound him apprentice to an upholsterer in London, but he ran away from his master and was brought before the magistrates. He was released from indentures in 1798 only on the intervention of King George III, whose favorite he

became, on payment of £50. Before he finally ran away at the age of eighteen, Dibdin spent much of his time learning his trade as a dramatist from the 6d gallery of the Royalty Theatre and working as a scene-painter and prompter. A sojourn in the provincial circuits, particularly in Kent, brought him a happy marriage, in May 1793, to the actress Nancy Hillier; their union produced nine children (seven sons and two daughters), few of whom survived to adulthood.

Dibdin, still shunned by his natural father, wrote songs under the pseudonym of Merchant. A move to London brought him small parts at Sadler's Wells beginning in April 1795. While acting at Maidstone in May 1798, he played a significant and perhaps sinister role in real life in the supposed escape attempt of Arthur O'Connor, a man whom he resembled, who was one of two Irishmen standing trial for treasonable opposition to the proposed Act of Union between Ireland and the rest of Britain. Possibly as a reward, Dibdin received the proceeds of a benefit performance as well as a seven-year contract as a manager at Covent Garden, with acting work for his wife.³ Each year he was invited to write a minimum number of operas and plays, from which he earned royalties and profit from sales of sheet music. Patriotic songs such as "The Mouth of the Nile" (1798), "The Naval Pillar" (1799), and "The British Raft" (1804), and the opera *The British Fleet of 1342* (1803) were highly popular, not least with government ministers. When Dibdin published his autobiography—in 1827, at a time of financial setback—his leading patrons were the Lords of Admiralty, though the book was dedicated to his wife.⁴ His songs, like those of his father, were what mainly ingratiated him with the British Navy.

It is possible that because of illegitimacy Dibdin had a desire to overcome exclusion from British society at the expense of other groups who incurred social disapproval. By the end of the eighteenth century there was suspicion of the Jewish community.⁵ A well-established and prosperous Sephardic congregation had been increased by migrants from the German states escaping wars and revolutionary upheavals. These included the parents of the tenor John Braham (c. 1774) and Nathan Meyer Rothschild (1797). At a time of high taxes, raised to finance the British war effort against France, the Jews' money-lending activities were less than popular. Dibdin's play *The Jew and the Doctor*, produced in London and Dublin with his brother Charles in 1799, contains a scene in which the hero Bromley asserts that the Jew Abednego is after his estates; but the latter stands up for himself and his race: "Vell I know I am a Jew. A Jew is a man vat in dish country can take de law upon any pody vat forgets the *judies* of a Christian." After effecting a romantic denouement, Abednego ends on a conciliatory note: "If ever you see a hapless creature vat needs your assistance, give it for my sake. And if de object should even *not* be a Christian, remember that humanity knows no difference of opinion."⁶

The contentious opera *Family Quarrels* may be examined against this background of racial tension. For his twelve operas, it was Dibdin's custom to write a libretto and possibly some simple songs, while others provided more elaborate music.⁷ In this case, John Braham and William Reeve were the main com-

posers, while John Fawcett, a noted Falstaff but a low-life comedian, provided the idea for the “Miss Levi” song. John Moorehead, a violinist and composer who was a protégé of Thomas Dibdin, may have provided extra music and possibly edited the 1802 version for German flute.⁸

The libretto of *Family Quarrels* is well constructed on traditional lines. The young couple Charles Supplejack and Caroline Crabstick are in love, but their parents Squire Supplejack and Sir Peppercorn Crabstick have quarreled. The West India heiress Lady Selina Sugarcane arrives, and efforts are made to pair her off with Charles, while Caroline is intended for the wealthy Yorkshire clothier Mushroom. All ends happily, in accordance with the convention of the time. The older generation are reconciled, and Charles (played by Braham) and Caroline are to be married. Selina accepts Mushroom. The opera’s fairly large cast includes Proteus the peddler, who poses as Aaron the Jew, and Susan, one of several village characters and servants.⁹

Although there are differences between the musical edition and the later printed libretto, the notorious “Miss Levi” song remained largely unaltered. The song of Betty Lilly—a “free” black servant who, preferring her own menfolk, mocks her employers in an imitation of African dialect—appears only in the musical version. As a contemporary advertisement put it: “In *representation* the powerful aid of *Musick* has more than compensated for the omission or derangement of certain passages once thought necessary to the Opera, as well as for the introduction of much extraneous colloquial additions.” Thus the twenty-one musical numbers, including songs and choruses, a duet, a quintet, a quartet, and a glee, varied according to circumstances, such as the availability of performers. The opera’s dress rehearsal went well, and Proteus the peddler’s serenade to “beauties of the Jewish persuasion” was much applauded.¹⁰ However, Dibdin received a visit from a Jewish lady of Rochester, known to his family, whose protestations against the proposed entertainment he ignored. There had been a demonstration against *The Jew and the Doctor* when it was revived on Christmas Day 1801, owing to the cancellation of *Selina and Avar* (possibly a version of Thomas Linley’s 1776 *Beauty and the Beast*). A newspaper report ascribed the disruption to “holiday licentiousness,” as apples and oranges flew onto the stage.¹¹ Dibdin had not heeded this warning. On the first night of *Family Quarrels* (19 December 1802) there was, perhaps unusually, a full house. Dibdin recalled that, although one-tenth of the audience laughed at the “Miss Levi” song, “sharp shooters in the gallery began to cry at a signal for the general charge, ‘It vont do! It vont do! It vont do, I tell you. Take it away. Take it to Sadler’s Wells.’” The appearance of Fawcett in his Jewish gaberdine led to an uproar “which, but for the subsequent O-P [old price] row of recent memory, would never have been equalled.”¹² The encore of the song was drowned out, as was the rest of the opera.

The printed version of the song, it must be stressed, gives little idea of Fawcett’s performance in what passed for Jewish dialect and was slightly expurgated compared to the original. The music also may have mocked Jewish intonation.

The Lord Chamberlain, who exercised censorship over dramatic performances, was mainly concerned with attacks on the government and threats to public order. Possibly he was not interested in opera. It is clear that a clever actor and singer such as Fawcett could turn innocent dialogue, as it appeared on the printed page, into what seemed to the victims to be a racist performance. In the printed version of *The Jew and the Doctor* stage directions indicate how easy it was to add offensive overtones: "In this speech the Jew is returning the [gold-topped] cane without looking at it; and while he is repeating the words *you hurt me very much* the top of it suddenly catches his eye. . . . his face, of course, changes from comic to serious."¹³ Again the press rounded on Dibdin, not so much for the Jewish song as for an offensive reference to black people, which is not in the published text of the libretto: "As a specimen of the jokes, it should be mentioned that Proteus, standing between a negro girl and a white woman, says, on being observed, that he cannot be *old*, for his hair is not grey but somewhere between black and white."¹⁴ This weak jest gained point from the singer's actions, and some objected to it when there was a struggle for the unilateral abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire, which was passed in 1807.

Thus the "Miss Levi" song was even more offensive than it appears in print. It was preceded by an ornate aria in the Italian style, "Though born in fashion's gayest sphere," which indicated that the ideal mate for a tenor would be deaf, nearly blind, and certainly dumb. This jest may have been linked to Braham's rejection of matchmaking efforts by the Jewish community and his liaison with Nancy Storace, with whom he returned from the continent in 1801 (she gave birth to their son in 1802).¹⁵ The "Miss Levi" song begins:

First dere vash Miss Levi, pretty Miss Levi.
 Vat a Miss Levi was she!
 Her eyes were such pretty little rollers,
 Dey soon got de better of me.
 She was all over so charming and lovely and killing,
 She cut ma heart in two all de world,
 So it vash a bad Shilling.
 Oh vat a charming Girl!

Proteus then explains that Miss Levi suddenly announces her marriage to another, so he pays court to Rachel, a tall girl whose father sells jewelry and watches near Saint Paul's (this may have been a person known to Londoners). However, disagreement over the price of the ring causes the peddler to pass on to jolly Miss Moses, who proves more formidable than appearances suggested. Her brother, with money respectably invested in the "shtock," teaches boxing (this may have been a reference to the champion Jewish pugilist Daniel Mendoza). The charming girl also takes boxing lessons. As Proteus concludes, "Tho' married people may spar a little, I shouldn't like a wife to knock me down. Oh vat a tumpin Miss Moses."¹⁶

Since Dibdin quotes selectively from his own collection of press clippings, notably from the *Morning Herald* and *Morning Post*, it is necessary to examine commentary on *Family Quarrels* in the newspapers themselves, particularly since their references to Jews show at least as hostile an attitude as that exhibited in the opera. One might expect the *Times* and the *Morning Chronicle*, which were receiving advertising revenue from Covent Garden, to have been enthusiastic about the piece, but they were not. The former reported only that there was an overflowing audience that approved music by Braham, Reeve, and others; while the latter noted that the disturbance came from the cheaper seats: "Jews in the boxes behaved in an exemplary manner," but "some children of the circumcision in the galleries . . . raised a clamour so loud and dread that it was impossible from that moment to the end of the act to hear a single sentence of dialogue." Fawcett stepped forward and said that no offense was intended. The *Times* commented that it could not understand why the Israelites should be so angered. The critic of the *Chronicle*, reporting on the second night, wondered whether he had previously been too harsh in describing the song as unworthy of the name of opera; he noted that it was encored by Gentiles, "but Duke's place shouted it down" (this was a reference to the east side of London, near the synagogue of Bevis Marks, where many Jews lived). It was reckoned disgraceful to leave victory in the hands of "slipper sellers and old clothesmen," and a general resolution prevailed to hear the "Miss Levi" song repeated.¹⁷

Like the *Times* and the *True Briton*, the *Morning Chronicle* took the view that freedom of expression on stage as well as public order were called into question by the two nights of Jewish demonstrations. "We earnestly recommend spirited measures . . . We make no doubt that the ringleaders of this conspiracy might be indicted and sent to Bridewell. . . . A posse of Bow Street runners [police] would carry this into effect."¹⁸ The *Times* was almost as indignant at the prospect of Jewish control of the stage when other groups and professions were subject to satire. By the fourth night the riots had died down. In his memoirs Dibdin included a letter written to the editor of the *Oracle* that stated: "John Bull treats such squeamish notions with contempt and will never gratify individual prejudices to combine against the freedom of the stage."¹⁹ The writer pointed out that Scots and Yorkshiremen were not exempt from ridicule. He might have added Irishmen, since another of Thomas Dibdin's songs, "The Birth, Christening, Marriages, and Other Family Misfortunes of Dennis Brulgruddery," sung by Mr. Johnstone as Kilruddery in *The Horse and the Widow* (1799), a satire on poor Irish Catholics, was to have been performed the same evening. Likewise, there was the racially provocative song "The Gypsies Came to My Father's Door" from *Family Quarrels*, a number in which the gypsies are accused of poisoning the family dog and leaving a changeling child (although there are more favorable references to the gypsies elsewhere).

It should be stressed that not all of Thomas Dibdin's most popular songs were ultranationalist or racist. The choruses and the arias for a sailor and a soldier in *Family Quarrels* reflect the desire for peace with France and for a pros-

perous England. Although Dibdin admitted that he had once written a parody of himself for general circulation, it is almost certain that he did not himself encourage the Jewish riots for commercial ends; still the result was to give the opera publicity. On this occasion the disturbance would have reflected on the management of Covent Garden, attended frequently by members of the royal family, nobility, and gentry. Indeed, in his memoirs Dibdin prints an apology to those he had offended: "The author of the new opera with implicit deference, assures the public he never entertained the remotest idea of giving any offence to any class of society, by the introduction of a character, which was not that of a Jew, but an assumed disguise."²⁰ This double-bluff device suggests that Dibdin did feel guilty about his conduct, or at least that he left himself a way of escape should matters become difficult.

The Jewish riots helped to launch Dibdin on a notable career at Covent Garden, in which his earnings soon rose to £1,500 a year.²¹ However, like his equally unfortunate father, he was a gambler by nature. Considerable losses in London and Dublin culminated in complete disaster at the Surrey Theatre in 1820. Dibdin was forced to surrender the lease of the theater and defend his expenditure, particularly on scenery and actors, before the Court of Insolvency. Finally he went bankrupt for £700.²² Undaunted, he eventually returned to Sadler's Wells, where in 1825 he staged his play *The Lawyer, the Jew, and the Yorkshireman*, which enjoyed a successful run.

Thus the Jewish rioters who told Thomas Dibdin to "get back to Sadler's Wells" finally triumphed, though they did not emerge unscathed from the battle with the press. It seems likely that they were motivated not only by anger at racial abuse but also by annoyance at what was perceived as the great tenor John Braham's rejection of his own community, which had nurtured him as a poverty-stricken youngster. The debate about how far censorship or self-censorship in opera should go still continues.

NOTES

1. *Athenaeum*, September 1841, p. 749.
2. *The Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 15, p. 9; *The Reminiscences of Thomas Dibdin*, vol. 1 (London: H. Colburn, 1827), pp. 10 ff. Charles Dibdin's papers are in the Houghton Library; see also *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, s.v. "Dibdin, Charles."
3. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, vol. 1, pp. 212–17; 240–42; *Theatre Notebook* (London, 1945–), vol. 6, p. 13.
4. *Theatre Notebook*, vol. 36, pp. 82–85.
5. See, for instance, Patrick Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis* (1796).
6. *The Jew and the Doctor* (1799). Dibdin's correspondence with the Royal Literary Fund suggests he received grants for the publication of his plays and libretti.
7. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, vol. 1, pp. 337ff; Theodore Fenner, *Opera in London: Views of the Press, 1785–1830* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), p. 440–46.
8. "Family Quarrels," a Comic Opera, by T. Dibdin, adapted for the German flute by Messrs Braham, Moorehead and Reeve (1802). This is only a melodic line with song lyrics and words of the ensembles. There is an outline of the overture, but harmonization of choruses, quartet and quintet, and accompa-

niment of solos and duets can only be inferred. The libretto was published in full in 1805.

9. The role of Susan was taken, appropriately enough, by Nancy Storace, the creator of Susanna in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*. Dibdin's own wife and mother also figured among the players of *Family Quarrels*.

10. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, vol. 1, pp. 340 ff.

11. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, vol. 1, pp. 341–42. See Roger Fiske, ed., *The Reminiscences of Michael Kelly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 157–58.

12. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, vol. 1, p. 341–42.

13. *The Jew and the Doctor*, p. 10.

14. *True Briton and Porcupine*, 21 December 1802.

15. See V. E. Chancellor, "Nancy Storace, Mozart's Susanna," *The Opera Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 2 (summer 1990), pp. 104–24. Small and sharp-witted, Braham married in 1816 a Miss Bolton of Ardwick, near Manchester, a

woman who does not seem to have been Jewish. They had six children, and their daughter Frances became Countess Waldegrave and a prominent member of the British aristocracy.

16. *Family Quarrels* libretto, p. 46. For Dibdin's dealings with the Lord Chamberlain, see Montague f. 219 (Jerdan), Bodleian Library, and Add MSS 42867 f. 105 (Colman), British Library.

17. *Times*, 20 December 1802; *Morning Chronicle*, 21 December 1802.

18. *Morning Chronicle*, 21 December 1802.

19. *Times*, 21 December 1802; Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, vol. 1, pp. 343–47.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

21. *Athenaeum*, September 1841, p. 749. See *The English Stage* (1832), vol. 7, pp. 580–81, where twenty-one or twenty-two performances of *Family Quarrels* are recorded.

22. Dibdin, *Reminiscences*, vol. 2, pp. 198ff.